

Water Vole (*Arvicola terrestris*)

The water vole is the UK's fastest declining native mammal, having suffered a loss of more than 95% this century. They are generally associated with slow-flowing or lentic water features, such as rivers, streams, ponds, ditches, canals and marshes.

The UKBAP priority habitats of particular importance to this species are: chalk rivers, coastal and floodplain grazing marsh, eutrophic standing waters, fens and reedbeds.

Current status

National status

Water voles are found throughout the UK, although local extinctions are predicted in certain counties over the next few years.

The water vole is protected under Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended in 1998), but only in respect of Section 9(4), which protects the animal's habitat (i.e. the banks of water features referred to above) and the animal itself from disturbance. It is a UKBAP Priority Species.

Status on the network

Water voles are present in most areas of the network, generally in roadside drains or other waterbodies where roads run alongside existing populations.

Current factors affecting the species

Loss and deterioration of habitat

New road developments and road improvement schemes may lead to the loss of bankside features needed for breeding and feeding, and to the fragmentation of the water vole habitat by obstructing access along linear water features. Roads can also cause the pollution of watercourses, leading to disease and mortality in water voles.

Predation by mink

The spread of mink throughout the country has been a significant factor in the decline of water voles in England, and represents a major threat to the future survival of the species in this country. Effective mink control is essential if populations of water vole are to recover.

Current action

Where drains are being removed from the network, replacements are being provided specifically for water voles.

The Water Vole Conservation Handbook (published by English Nature, the Environment Agency and the Wildlife and Conservation Research Unit) provides details on mitigation and management for water voles.



Objectives

The aim of the Highways Agency Species Action Plan for the water vole is to reduce the impact of pollution from existing roads, and to ensure that

new road developments avoid or adequately mitigate any potential impacts on the species.

	Objective	Proposed actions
A	To avoid impacts of new road schemes or improvements on water voles.	4
B	To mitigate unavoidable impacts on water voles and/or their habitats.	5
C	To safeguard and enhance known water voles populations close to the road network.	3, 6, 7
D	To raise the awareness of HA staff, Managing Agents and consultants regarding the significance of water voles on the network.	1, 2, 8
E	To safeguard and enhance potentially suitable habitat features for water voles within the soft estate and wetland habitats downstream of road crossings.	3, 6, 7
F	To develop a greater knowledge of the distribution of water voles on the soft estate.	3

Proposed action

The following table lists the actions required to achieve the objectives set out in this Plan. For some of the actions, potential partners have

been assigned as likely sources of cooperation. Targets are provided to give an indication of the timescale for the proposed action.

	Action	Potential partners	Target
	<i>Policy, guidance and advice</i>		
1	Consider publication of an Advice Note on water voles.	EA, EN	2004
2	Provide detailed information in TRMM on the management of the soft estate for the benefit of water voles.	EA	2004
	<i>Surveying</i>		
3	Survey suitable areas of the soft estate adjacent to existing water vole populations, and record results both of suitable habitat and the presence of water voles on the Environmental Database.	-	2006
	<i>Mitigation and Management</i>		
4	For all new road schemes and road improvements, include search for records of water voles in desk study at stage 1 and in surveys at stage 2. Early identification of this constraint may allow impacts to be avoided.	-	Ongoing

	<i>Action (continued)</i>	Potential partners	Target
	<i>Mitigation and Management</i>		
5	Where impacts of new schemes and road improvements on water vole habitat are unavoidable, consider the options for compensatory habitat improvements and pollution control.	EA	Ongoing
6	Consult with English Nature and/or Environment Agency to ensure that known sites for water vole on the soft estate are managed for the benefit of water voles.	EA	Ongoing
7	Increase the amount of available water vole habitat by removing barriers to dispersal. Create 20 new vole-friendly drains/water features.	EA	By 2012
	<i>Communications and publicity</i>		
8	Information on water voles should be included in environmental training for HA staff and Managing Agents.	-	2003

Links with other plans

This plan should be read in conjunction with the HAP for water features and the Species Action Plan for otters.

Species Action Plans for the water vole are included in a total of 34 LBAPs across England.

Lead partner

The lead partner for the water vole in the UKBAP is the Environment Agency.

